EReaders and the K-8 School Library

Factors to Consider Before Purchasing.

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Providing access to information and opportunities for personal advancement are core values that represent the heart of a library’s mission. As more and more students speak of reading on their personal digital devices, it has prompted me to become more aware of the digital divide that exists in our student body. A vast majority of the students do not own eReaders. While the option exists to read digital books on desktop computers, what students want is the convenience and cool factor of eReaders and or tablets.

I once thought eReaders and downloading eBooks were items to be provided in the home. Even after I purchased my own eReader and enjoyed first-hand the convenience of this device, I thought my role as a school librarian was simply to promote the availability of eBooks. I wrote many newsletter articles promoting eBook aggregators such as Overdrive and Project Gutenberg. The acquisition of digital books, with such limited funding, seemed impossible and non-essential. However, I have subsequently made a complete reversal in my thinking.

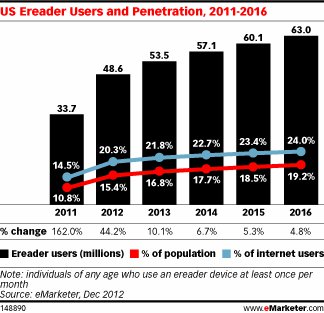
[](http://www.e-reader-info.com/us-e-reader-market-2011-2016-chart)In the most recent round of budget preparations, I requested that the school library purchase six eReaders and venture into the world of circulating eBooks. I justified the expenditures by emphasizing sound educational goals. The number of people with eReaders is growing by leaps and bounds. For a snapshot of the growth trend of eReaders consider the results of a recent survey posted at eMarketer.com. “It’s estimated that 50 million Americans used an eReader at least monthly in 2012.” Figure 1 shows how this number is forecasted to grow. While these numbers may not reflect school age children it does show that students need to be aware of and have experience in using this technology.

Figure US Ereader Users

EBooks and eReaders are excellent tools for differentiation in education since the functionality of most models allows students to enlarge the text, highlight, add notes, and then transfer the information to a paper or digital file. Some models with text-to-speech functions give struggling readers additional options for accessing literature.

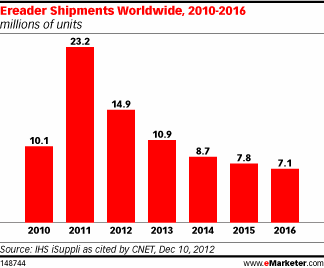
One of my first considerations was to decide between eReaders or tablets. In the library, I was comfortable with circulating only single purpose eReaders. I feel students have enough options to browse websites. When I sign out an eBook, I could quantify that the students are more than likely reading literature with the full range of story elements. Since my professional goal is to promote reading comprehension, and a love of reading, the single purpose eReaders seemed the best option. However, the most recent data suggests that tablets may be the device of choice. There is an additional point to be made after examining the data in Figure 2. The year 2011 is the peak year for eReaders, and shipments of new eReaders are forecasted to dwindle. However, the vast number of people who own them will still continue to read on them. These single purpose devices aren’t expected to go away anytime soon.

Figure 2 Ereader Shipments Worldwide 2010-2016

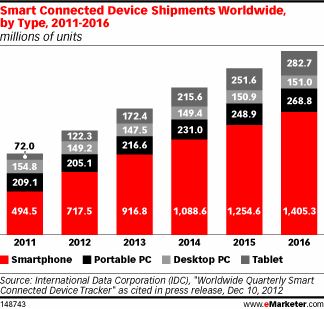
When deciding which eReaders to purchase, I consulted a number of websites posting comparisons of the leading products. I also consulted library journals for recommended products for school settings. The Nook Simple Touch emerged as a good choice due to its cost, functionality, long battery life, and the number of formats it supports. The formats compatible with the Nook include EPub formats, as well as eReader, HTML, and PDF. EPub is considered an open source eBook standard. Many Overdrive free downloads are in the EPub format. I thought having this capability would give students the most affordable options for reading books with the eReaders. The aggregator, Overdrive previously did not offer downloadable eBooks for Kindles.

Figure 3 Smart Connected Device Shipments Worldwide by Type 2011-2016

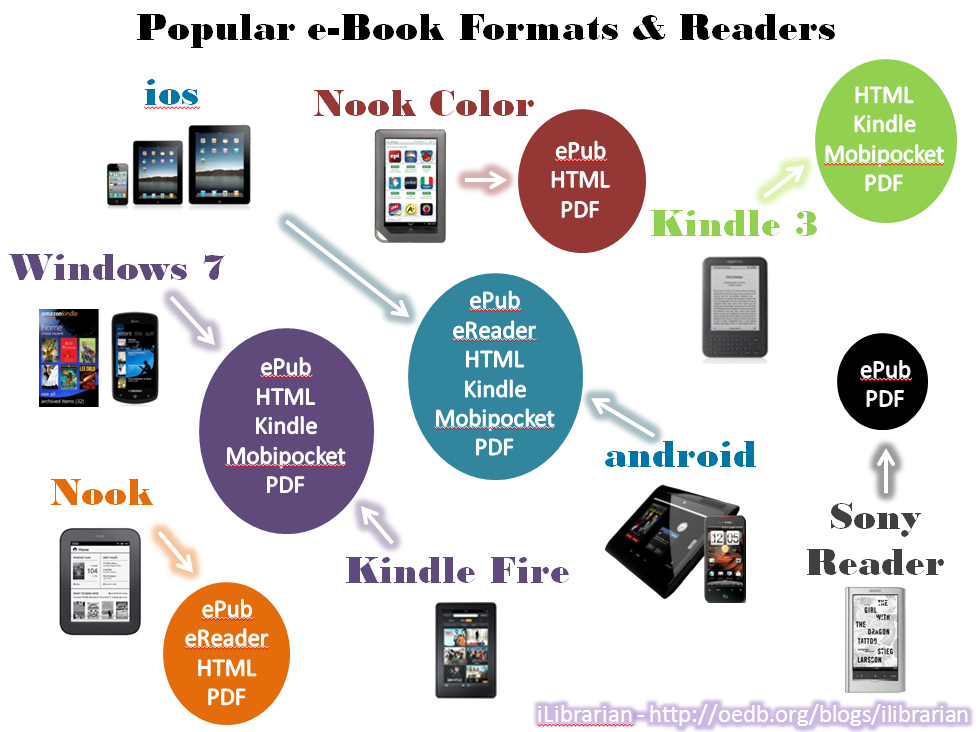
When I began my investigation into purchasing eReaders, I was advised to see how the purchasing procedures in my district would align with acquiring eBooks. I had heard previous librarians describe that with a school credit card, they purchased eBooks and they would download them onto six devices registered under their account. Once I decided on the Barnes and Noble Nook Simple Touch, I was ready to submit my request. Immediately I ran into a snag. Our district has a credit card with Amazon, but not with Barnes and Noble (B&N). Any books purchased for eReaders through B&N would have to be on my own credit card and submitted for later reimbursement. This seemed like quite a mountain of additional paperwork. Consequently, the Amazon Kindle products have emerged as the most likely devices to purchase. Overdrive has recently begun to offer Amazon formatted eBooks for download. Now people with Kindles can find more eBooks in the amz format for free download through Overdrive.

Figure 4 Popular e-Book Formats & Readers.

My primary goal is to build a collection of fiction novels to circulate on school owned eReaders. Student and teacher requests would drive the acquisitions. The six devices would sign out just like print books. When the device is signed out, the book is unavailable until it is returned.

I have discovered that some school libraries purchase eBook collections and the digital content is available without restrictions. It is my understanding that this model is most popular with non-fiction collections. Christopher Harris, writing for American Libraries, noted that, “A great deal of nonfiction at the K–12 level is already available in a variety of formats and under various licensing terms. Facilitating their use as part of a class project, many of the books can be secured with unlimited, simultaneous-access rights.” For our school, this step into digital non-fiction would be phase two. Another department is currently piloting a digital textbook program. Building these types of collections might be better suited for grade level teams to purchase to support their units.

I have reviewed a wide number of journal articles, blog posts, and slide share presentations, to research my eReader questions. There is consensus on one point among all writers. The eBook market and platforms for accessing them are evolving quickly. (Hamilton 2012) With such a pace of change, a wise strategy is to buy as much versatility as possible, avoid long term contracts, and build solid partnerships with vendors where ever possible.

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